



## Translation and Americanism in Brazil: 1920-1970

Irene Hirsch & John Milton

Universidade Estadual de Campinas and Universidade de São Paulo

E-mails: [hirenerih@terra.com.br](mailto:hirenerih@terra.com.br) and [jmilton@usp.br](mailto:jmilton@usp.br)

**Abstract:** The habits of Brazilian readers changed considerably throughout the fifty years under consideration. The expansion of the reading public as a consequence of a new order and the modernization of the book industry were accompanied by translations of American literature. In this article we look into the growing presence of the US through translations in Brazil in this period and the different ways in which this presence could be seen.

**Key words:** American literature, nationalism, publishing houses, culture industry.

### 1. Introduction: an Ambivalent Relationship

The progressive americanization of the habits of Brazilian readers was a process which began in the early 1920s and resulted in a transformation of the book market, in which translation played a major role. Until then, there had been limited interest in American books, the main reason being the dominant French cultural influence. Most publishing companies were in the hands of Portuguese or French-owned companies, and the target market was very much that of the Francophile middle-class elite.

However, throughout the 20th century, the commercial success of translated fiction, which was mostly American, was consolidated and new cultural standards were introduced through publications. At the same time, the resistance of many intellectuals to the assimilation of American patterns also increased. The new American influences were appropriated and remodeled, as will be seen later in the article.

Important Brazilian intellectuals reacted against the American presence, like, for instance, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, who, in an article called “A decadência do romance” [The decadence of novel], criticized the short-story genre because of its “Yankee” origins.

It seems to be an inferior genre, and superficial American mass culture is already beginning to dominate Brazilian letters:

*Yanquismo* em literatura!... Eis a última modalidade da lei do menor esforço aplicada às letras. Todo mundo conhece as reviravoltas que tem dado a humanidade desde que a americanização do globo vem se tornando um fato incontestável.

O que é fato e ninguém nega é a virulência com que grafou nossas letras, o *yanquismo*. Uma de suas manifestações mais evidentes é o notável incremento que toma entre nós o conto leve e curto, com prejuízo do romance.

[Yankeeism in literature!... That is the latest aspect of the law of lack of effort applied to literature. Everybody knows the reversals humanity has been going through since the americanization of the globe became an unquestionable fact.

And the fact is that nobody denies the virulence that Yankeeism marked our literature. One of its most obvious manifestations is the remarkable development of the light short story in detriment of the novel] (HOLANDA 1996: 105).<sup>1</sup>

In 1945, another well-known intellectual, Orígenes Lessa, also stated his distaste of of this kind of fiction for the same reasons. In his preface to a short story anthology, *Norte-americanos antigos e modernos* [*Old and Modern North Americans*], he somewhat surprisingly expressed his indignation against the genre, which, according to his point of view, only proliferated because of the US:

Talvez não haja outro país onde seja tão grande, como nos Estados Unidos, a produção de contos, nem tão medíocre. Porque é uma indústria rendosa e tentadora, alimentada por volumosas revistas bem pagantes. Grandes publicações com a obrigação de encher semanalmente dezenas de páginas com *short stories*, tão do gosto público, são um convite permanente à imaginação geral. O conto passou a ser uma indústria caseira que trabalha com todos os característicos da produção em série, de acordo com receitas previamente experimentadas e vitoriosas.

[Perhaps there is no other country where the production of short stories is so great and so mediocre as the in US. Because it is a profitable and tempting factory fed by bulky magazines which pay well. Fat publications with the weekly obligation to fill innumerable pages with short stories, so well-adapted to the taste of the public, are a permanent

invitation to the general imagination. The short story has become a domestic factory that has all the characteristics of mass production, following previously tested and successful recipes].

Again the short story is an inferior genre, which has no aesthetic or artistic qualities. It is commercial, mass-produced, a central part of the culture industry which was already dominating and destroying Brazil. This anti-Americanism can also be seen in the lyrics of popular musicians such as Lamartine Babo and Noel Rosa. According to Antonio Pedro Tota, various songs from the decades of 1930 and 1940 used the theme of Americanization, many of them with nationalistic messages in defense of Brazilian culture:

A lista é grande, mas para ficar só com alguns exemplos cito “*Boogie-woogie do rato*”, de Denis Brean; “*Oh! Boy*”, de Haroldo Lobo e Ciro de Souza; “*Cowboy do amor*”, de Wilson Batista e Roberto Martins, “*Dança do boogie-woogie*” de Carlos Armando; “*Samba de Casaca*” de Pedro Caetano e Walfrido Silva; “*Gosto mais de swing*” de Lauro Maia; “*O samba agora vai*” de Pedro Caetano, e o clássico “*Yes, nós temos bananas*” de Alberto Ribeiro e João do Barro

[The list is big but I quote a few examples: “*Boogie-woogie do rato*”, by Denis Brean; “*Oh! Boy*”, by Haroldo Lobo and Ciro de Souza; “*Cowboy do amor*”, by Wilson Batista and Roberto Martins, “*Dança do boogie-woogie*” by Carlos Armando; “*Samba de Casaca*” by Pedro Caetano and Walfrido Silva; “*Gosto mais de swing*” by Lauro Maia; “*O samba agora vai*” by Pedro Caetano, and the classic “*Yes, nós temos bananas*” by Alberto Ribeiro and João do Barro] (TOTA 2000:169).

American industrial influence can be seen in an earlier period. In the mid-nineteenth century, Brazil, a monarchy with an agrarian and slavocrat society, was beginning to enter the emerging global capitalism and took part in regional and international exhibitions of manufactured goods and inventions. Brazil participated in the Great Exhibition of London (1862), and the fairs of Paris (1867 and 1889), Vienna (1873) and Philadelphia (1876) (SCHWARCZ 1998: 397). This was the beginning of the continuous presence of American technology in Brazil, which soon would become “cultural interference”, according to critics.

Positivists, monarchists and even some republicans opposed this new American influence, and in 1893 the first protest against the Yankees was published, *A ilusão americana* [*The American illusion*], by Eduardo Prado, which was confiscated by the São Paulo police, and the aristocratic writer had to flee to Europe in order to avoid prison. However, the book had a profound impact on public opinion, and a second warning of the “foreign danger” followed, *A intervenção estrangeira durante a revolta de 1893* [*The foreign interventions during the uprising of 1893*] by Joaquim Nabuco, published in 1896. Later Nabuco supported to the Republic, defended pan-Americanism, and was the first ambassador of Brazil in Washington, but Eduardo Prado remained hostile to the influence of the US until his death in 1900 (BANDEIRA 1978: 146 148).

Yet we can also see a line of Brazilian intellectuals who greatly admired things American, which, at the end of the 19th century, was still a symbol for the ideals of democracy. For those who took power after the Proclamation of Republic (1889), Americanization meant the end of the colonial heritage and the beginning of progress and democracy. For instance, Rui Barbosa, the strategist of the first Republican government, was anxious to put Brazil on the level of the US. He based his effort to industrialize Brazil on the protectionist doctrine of Alexander Hamilton. He increased credit lines, made incentives for the creation of public companies, abandoned the gold reserve, and allowed banks to issue bonds. As a result, in the period between November 1889 and October 1890 more companies were set up than during the whole seven decades of the Empire. A committee of five members under the leadership of Rui Barbosa – congressman, senator, minister, and candidate to the Presidency of Republic on two occasions – wrote the new constitution, a more or less faithful copy of the American constitution, federalism was established, and the name of the country became “Estados Unidos do Brasil”, using stars as does the American flag, but in different colors, yellow and green (BANDEIRA 1978: 133 134).

However, US cultural influence increased after the First World War, especially after the establishment of the industrial bases of Hollywood and mass advertising. At this time important transformations were taking place in the daily routine of Brazilians: an examination of the list of imports shows the introductions of new products such as petrol,

kerosene, railway material, engines, typewriters, sewing machines, phonographs, films and fruit like apples and pears (BANDEIRA 1978: 208).

American political influence was also viewed with suspicion by a number of Brazilian intellectuals. The pro-American ideas of Gilberto Amado, Monteiro Lobato, among others were not shared by people like Agripino Grieco, for instance, who believed that “Yankee liberalism was one of the masterpieces of human mythomaniacs”, that the great American cities were “porcópolis” [pig cities] and that in the US they “burnt the blacks like live torches”, (BANDEIRA 1978: 209 210). According to Nelson Werneck Sodré, the position of the learned people at the beginning of the century was that of contempt for the US (SODRÉ 1998: 295).

At times this resistance meant the defense of interests of sectors of Brazilian industry against foreign interests. This was the case of the campaign of Brazilian publishers against Pocket Books Inc., an American company that was, via Argentina, entering the Brazilian publishing market and dumping books written in Portuguese and printed in the US. This generated protests from intellectuals and publishers like Nelson Palma Travassos and Edgard Cavalheiro (KOSHYIAMA 1982: 145 146).

## **2. Monteiro Lobato: “A Nation is made by men and books”**

One intellectual who was in favor of the modifications brought by the US was Monteiro Lobato, an internationalist and free marketeer, an admirer of the US who was also branded as a Communist by his detractors, and who had been the Brazilian commercial attaché in the US from 1928 to 1931 in the Washington Luis government, which had been dominated by the free market coffee planters and exporters, who dominated the Brazilian economy at the time.

A writer of fiction, children’s books and treatises on bringing a more forward-looking mentality to Brazil, and a publisher, first at Monteiro Lobato e Cia., and then at Companhia Editora Nacional, Lobato was the key figure in the development of the Brazilian book industry. He was the first publisher in Brazil to attempt to develop the book industry as a consumer industry with a mass market for books. Until Lobato, most

publishing was in the hands of Portuguese or French-owned companies, and the target market was very much that of the Francophile middle-class elite.

By 1920 more than half of all the literary works published in Brazil were published by Monteiro Lobato e Cia., and in 1941, a quarter of all books published in Brazil were produced by Lobato's Companhia Editora Nacional (KOSHIYAMA 1982: 133). Lobato was a major public figure in Brazil from 1918 to 1927 as, in addition to the success of his books, he wrote a regular column for the influential newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo* and bought the middlebrow journal, *Revista do Brasil*.

Lobato believed that a growing book industry would greatly aid Brazilian development, “Um país se faz com homens e livros” [A country is made by men and books] (KOSHIYAMA 1982: 99). People act through knowing the human experience of other people, which is found in the means of communication, especially books, and then acting. But despite this exaltation of the book, Lobato had a hard-headed commercial attitude to selling books, which he saw as commercial objects which could be commercialized just as other goods were, in a variety of sales points: “livro não é gênero de primeira necessidade [...] é sobremesa: tem que ser posto embaixo do nariz do freguês, para provocar-lhe a gulodice” [“Books are not staple products... they are desserts: they must be put under the nose of the customer, to excite his gluttony”] (in KOSHIYAMA 1982: 72). By copying the more creative North American marketing methods, Lobato managed to increase the sales points for his works from 40, the total number of bookshops in Brazil, to 1,200, which included chemists and newsstands. He innovated in terms of the visual presentation of the book, and was responsible for much more attractive covers than the dull yellow featureless covers which followed the French fashion.

Another of the reasons for Lobato's pro-American stance was the French dominance of Brazilian cultural life, as in many other countries. One reason for the lack of translations of highbrow literature, poetry etc was that the elite spoke and read French and would look to Paris for ideas and fashions. Theatrical fashions came almost exclusively from France. And the French influence would be doubled as troupes coming from Portugal would be performing Portuguese works which had been influenced by French fashions (BRANDÃO 2001). Much literature from outside France, for example, the poetry of Byron, came into

Brazil through the French translations (BARBOSA 1975). And the Brazilian legal system, following many other countries, adopted the Napoleonic Code in 1916.

Lobato was a severe critic and *bête noire* of the first Getúlio Vargas government (1930-1945), attacking the slow, inefficient, corrupt and backward Brazilian way of doing things. During his period as commercial attaché in the US (1928-1931), Lobato was greatly impressed by American economic organization and efficiency. He was a great fan of Henry Ford and visited the Detroit plant. Lobato believed that such mass production techniques should be used in the book industry. The way in which the US had taken advantage of its mineral wealth, particularly iron ore, coal and oil, showed Lobato what Brazil might be capable of if the country took the correct steps, and developed its own oil industry along the American pattern, rather than leaving it at the mercy of the American-owned trusts, especially the Standard Oil Corporation. On his return from the US, Lobato invested all his efforts and capital in oil prospecting in Brazil. However, these plans were foiled by the onset of the hardening of the Vargas dictatorship in 1937 and the advent of the *Estado Novo*, when all prospecting plans were centralized and placed under the control of the government, and Lobato's financial losses were considerable.

All the children's literature which was available in Brazil when Lobato began writing was written in the Portuguese of Portugal, and the desire to provide stories his own and other Brazilian children could read stimulated Lobato to write literature for children. Lobato believed in developing the Brazilian language and that after 400 years of subservience to Portugal, it was now time to definitively break away from Lisbon and develop a separate Brazilian language.

### **3. The Growth of Publishing**

However, in spite of the resistance and protests of the opponents, the American presence in Brazil strengthened, especially as a result of Good Neighbor policy of Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s, designed to ensure that the Brazilian government, which had shown signs of support for the Axis powers, supported the Allies. In fact Brazil did actually join the Second World War on the side of the Allies, sending an expeditionary force to Italy in

1944. Other important factors were the expansion of radio and the influence of American cinema.

The hegemony of the US marked many sectors of Brazilian society, changing habits, usages and behaviors: cartoons, Superman, plastic cowboys, chewing gum, Coca Cola, jazz, etc, became part of Brazilian day-to-day reality after World War II (BANDEIRA 1978: 309 310). Brazilian writers, susceptible to the transformations, incorporated the novelties.

The import substitution period from 1930 to 1950 saw a growing process of industrialization and urbanization in Brazil. The expanding labor market allowed for a rise in the purchasing power of those who hitherto had had little access to consumer goods. A rise in personal income therefore meant a rise in consumption. The changes in the educational policies adopted by the government to improve basic education and literacy led to a rising number of literate people and hence of potential readers of books and magazines. Other sources of consumption involved new forms of mass media such as the cinema and the radio.

In the publishing market the American presence is initially felt with the publications of the translations of fiction in English by Companhia Editora Nacional and *Reader's Digest*, which was launched at the beginning of 1942. Other publishing houses like Globo, Porto Alegre, and José Olympio, Rio de Janeiro were responsible for the translation of many American writers. Together with the reduction of imports from Europe, there was an enormous growth in the national publishing sector as a whole, i.e., newspapers, magazines and books.

This is the period that marked the beginning of a mass culture in Brazil, the period of the consolidation of an urban and industrial society. There was a reshaping of Brazilian post-World War II society which redefined the press, the radio and the cinema, and introduced new media like television and marketing (ORTIZ 2001: 38).

#### **4. Growing American Influence**



The introduction of American mass culture thus resulted in the propagation of American values through advertising, cinema, radio and mass publications. The relationship between society and culture was also modified, as culture became a commercial investment, and in the 1960s and 1970s this market was consolidated market. The military coup of 1964 reorganized the Brazilian economy, which now integrated the process of the internalization of the capital, which Ortiz calls “the second industrial revolution” (ORTIZ 2001: 14).

Especially important was the signing of the MEC-SNEL-USAID treaty for Cooperation for Technical, Scientific and Educational Publications, on 6 January 1967, when the Brazilian publishing market was flooded with publications of American writers, i.e., exactly when the diffusion of these works became object of the public policy of Brazilian government. According to this treaty, 51 million translations of books originally published in the US would be used in the Brazilian school system, in a period of three years, beginning in 1967. While MEC (Ministry of Education and Culture) and SNEL (National Union of Book Publishers) carried out the policy, the USAID (United States Agency for International Development) personnel kept the control of technical details of the manufacture the books, like the production, illustrations, editing and distribution, besides the supervision of the process of acquisition of copyrights.

This treaty represented a combination of the mutual interests of the military regime and the emerging private groups of publishers. An important sector of the book market was made up of publishers like AGIR, Francisco Alves, Globo, Kosmos, LTB, Monterrey, Nacional, José Olympio, Vecchi, Cruzeiro, Saraiva, GRD, which financed the activities of IPES (Institute of Research and Social Studies), an organization that was responsible for an intense anti-communist campaign in the years before the military coup of 1964.

As a reward, the 1967 constitution guaranteed benefits to the publishers like tax exemptions, except income tax, from all stages of production and trade of books, including the manufacture of paper, besides facilitating the importation of new equipment for the publishing industry (HALLEWELL 1985: 462 463).

The growth of the publishing market in Brazil can be seen in numerical terms: in the early 1960s the annual average was 0.5 books per inhabitant, two decades later, or else,

after the signature of the MEC-USAID-SNEL treaty, this number quadrupled, and two books were published for every citizen.

## **5. American Poetry in Translation**

If we take a look at poetry translated in Brazil at the end of the period in question, we can find a large number of American poets published, American authors being much more frequently translated than their British counterparts, and two groups of American poets have found particular favour: modernists such as Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound; and secondly, the Beat poets, Allen Ginsberg, Charles Bukowski, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Gregory Corso, who were extremely popular during the 1960s and 1970s, when open defiance of the military regime was often difficult and could result in violent repression, and the radical Beat culture coming from the US captured much of the energy which could not openly make political protests in Brazil.

Pound has been particularly important for the concrete poets and translators, Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, who have specialized in translating non-canonical writers, who have attempted to “revolutionize” language. Other writers they have translated include Maiakovski, James Joyce, Lewis Carroll, Mallarmé, John Donne, and Haroldo has helped “rehabilitated” the neologising translation of Odorico Mendes of the *Odyssey*, which had been execrated by Brazilian critics Silvio Romero and Antonio Candido, and which had been out in the cold for many years (see MILTON 1993: 164-165).

## **6. Mass Culture vs. Erudite Culture**

Different from translations of poetry, which appealed to a more erudite clientele, the selection of works of fiction and the way they were translated followed the political and economic aspirations of the national book market. These political and economic reasons determined a new kind of organization of the Brazilian book market, which went through an unprecedented expansion in the late 1960s. The American presence was facilitated both

by the reorganization of the economy and the introduction of a mass culture, which understood that culture was an investment and the book a commercial good, and by the MEC-SNEL-USAID treaty, which transformed this mass production into an object of public policy and prioritized American writers.

At the same time, the growth of the book industry had its benefits as it democratized information by increasing the number of readers, reducing the price of the books and creating an industrial complex for publishing. Mass culture was both an instrument of ideological domination of the US and, at the same time, a contribution to the cultural modernization of Brazilian society.

Thus, it is not possible to think about American presence in Brazil without having in mind an ambiguous phenomenon: conservative, as it was ideologically and financially committed to the US, and innovative, as it popularized Brazilian books, making them accessible to a greater number of readers, a consequence of the remodeling of the national book industry. In brief, it was the tension between these two opposing forces that gave impulse to the reformulations of the new era.

Therefore, the American influence via translations did not result in the dissolution of the Brazilian literary system; on the contrary, by assuring the survival of publishing houses and, at the same time, providing the means of making a living for a large number of writers, it helped to put other projects into practice, some of which were of greater intellectual prestige, and which may not have been economically feasible.

To illustrate this ambivalence, there is the case of two different collections of Globo publishing house, the AMARELA and the NOBEL. The first was directed to the publication of detective novels, a kind of sub-genre at the time, while Nobel only published books of “unquestionable prestige”. Both lasted the same period of time, 25 years, but, unlike Amarela, Nobel had several significant ups and downs (AMORIM 2000: 91). So, the less prestigious collection financially supported the more prestigious, which “influenced a whole generation of readers”, a phenomenon which can also be found in houses such as Gallimard. At the same time, AMARELA also supplied the financial needs of important literary figures like Marques Rebelo, Mário Quintana, Herberto Caro and Erico Verissimo.

The relationship between national literature and translated literature occurred in similar circumstances, with translations financing national literary projects.

## 7. Conclusion

Throughout the fifty years considered in this article, there were important modifications in the relationship between Brazil and the US, which is still one of the main axes of Brazilian politics. Processes like the growth of Brazilian industry, the increase in the reading public, and the expansion of basic education occurred differently, producing diverse situations and contexts. The growing involvement of Brazilian culture with American culture in different historical periods, like the República Velha, the Vargas dictatorship, the post-Second World War period, the modernization of Brazil under Juscelino Kubitschek, and the subsequent military dictatorship, were not always of the same kind or intensity. Besides, the development of the culture industry in Brazil took place at the same time the book industry in the US was growing, though on a smaller scale.

To understand the integration of foreign works in a literary system without identifying an appropriation of literary and linguistic goods means to presuming the existence of a simplistic binary opposition between dominant and dominated literary fields. Hopefully, this study has shown that the relationships in the literary field are of a more complex nature: the dependence is not univocal, even if it is possible to identify the dominance of certain literary models over others.

Translations of American fiction, which have accounted for the great majority of translated fiction, along with translations of American modernist and Beat poets, which have helped to renew Brazilian poetry, have played an important role in influencing contemporary reading habits of different elements of society.

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<sup>i</sup> All translations of quotations hereafter were made by the authors.